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Who was colonized and when? A cross-country analysis of determinants[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The process of colonization has shaped the economic and demographic contours of the modern world. In this paper, we study the determinants of the occurrence and timing of colonization of non-European countries by Western European powers. Of particular interest is the role of early development measures that are known to be strong correlates of present-day levels of income. We show that non-European societies with longer histories of agriculture and statehood and higher levels of technology adoption in 1500 were less likely to be colonized, and tended to be colonized later if at all. We also find that proximity to the colonizing powers, disease environment, and latitude are significant predictors of the occurrence and timing of colonization, although their impacts are less robust to choice of country sample. Our models have high explanatory power, and their support for the significance of early development is robust to the use of alternative indicators of early development and disease, to the use of instruments to focus on the exogenous component of early development, and to the joint estimation of the colonization and timing equations to correct for potential selection bias.

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1. Introduction

There is little disagreement among historians that the process by which Western European nations set sail into the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, began the conquest of their islands and coastlines, and eventually came to control vast swaths of territory in the Americas, Africa, Asia and the Pacific, is one of the most important factors that shaped the economic and demographic contours of the modern world. The age of colonialism began with the European discoveries of sea routes around Africa's southern coast (1488) and to the Americas (1492), or perhaps a bit earlier with the settlement of previously uninhabited Atlantic islands like Cape Verde in 1462 (Landes, 1998). Thereafter, by discovery, conquest, and settlement, the emerging nation-states of Portugal, Spain, the Dutch Republic, France, and England expanded their reach, spreading

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European institutions, culture, and genes, and forcing or inducing massive cross-continental movements of Africans and others. By the time that the era of colonization ended in the decades after World War II, the populations of countries in the Americas, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere had been radically transformed, and new nation-states had been brought into being on four continents—North and South America, Africa, and Australia—with borders bearing no relation to pre-colonial precedents.

On the eve of World War II, two-fifths of the world's land area and a third of its population were in colonies, dependencies, or dominions of Western European colonizing powers. A further third of world territory had been colonized by these European powers sometime between the 15th and 19th centuries and had already emerged as independent nations. In many of the latter cases, however, it was not the once-colonized peoples that became independent, but rather the descendants of the colonizers, so that the process of colonization was never truly reversed. In other cases, post-colonial populations were mainly descended from people that the colonizers had imported as slave or indentured laborers, or by admixtures of indigenous, “imported” and colonizing populations. What is called “the Third World” or “the developing world” consists overwhelmingly of ex-colonies, including both ones that underwent dramatic changes in source population of the kinds just described (such as those in the Americas) and ones that did not (such as most in Africa, India, and ex-colonial Asia—see [Putterman and Weil, 2010](#); [Chanda et al., 2014](#)).

Yet not all of the non-European world was colonized by Western European maritime powers. Turkey, Iran, China and Japan are among the Eurasian countries not colonized by Western Europeans, while parts of Central Asia that became independent states when the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991 had been absorbed into the land based empire of Russia and were never ruled by Western European colonizers ([Landes, 1998](#); [Acemoglu et al., 2001, 2002, 2005](#), likewise distinguish between European maritime colonization and Eurasian land-based empires). Furthermore, places that were colonized by Western Europeans came under their rule at very different times: for example, the late 15th and early 16th century for the Americas, but the late 19th and early 20th century for most of sub-Saharan Africa—a difference of four hundred years. The Philippines was under Spanish rule by the early 17th century, whereas Australia, New Zealand, New Guinea and Vietnam were not colonized until the 19th century, and countries including Syria and Jordan experienced Western European rule only after World War I.

The impact of the colonial era is recognized in some of the most influential papers on long run economic growth. But none of them, to our knowledge, attempt to explain why some countries were colonized and others not, or why some were colonies as early as the 15th century while many others became colonies only in the late 19th or early 20th centuries.

Our attempt to explain the occurrence and timing of colonization extends the literature on the persistence of early developmental advantages, which was recently surveyed by [Spolaore and Wacziarg \(2013\)](#). Outside of economics, the most influential work in this literature is [Diamond \(1997\)](#), which places the question of colonization front and center, emphasizing the asymmetric character of the colonization process. “The modern United States,” Diamond writes, “is a European-molded society, occupying lands conquered from Native Americans and incorporating the descendants of millions of sub-Saharan black Africans brought to America as slaves. Modern Europe is not a society molded by sub-Saharan black Africans who brought millions of Native Americans as slaves. ... The whole modern world has been shaped by lopsided outcomes ([Diamond, pp. 24–25](#)).” How, Diamond asks, can this lopsidedness be explained?

Diamond's analysis, with its emphasis on the geographic distribution of the precursors of major domesticated plants and animals, has been much discussed by economists. But while several studies (beginning with [Hibbs and Olsson, 2004](#)) have found support for his thesis about the impact of early agriculture on subsequent economic development, we are the first to statistically examine his related idea regarding the impact of early agriculture on colonization. Diamond used a broad set of descriptive case studies to build an explanation of why European powers colonized (most of) the Americas, Africa and Oceania, and not the other way around. In this paper, we take the general idea that early development contributes to the explanation of colonization patterns and provide a statistical assessment by directing our attention to the cross-sectional variation in the occurrence and the timing of colonization in the non-European world.

While testing the impact of early agrarian civilizations on colonization provides the initial impetus to our study, we also bring additional geographic and disease considerations to bear in our analysis. We find that both nautical distance from Western Europe, and the distance to be traversed overland in the cases of landlocked and semi-landlocked countries (explained below), play roles in both the occurrence and timing of colonization. We find the presence of disease environments deadly to Europeans to be a major delayer, but not preventer, of colonization.

A common criticism of Diamond's discussion concerns its relative silence on the divergence between European and other Eurasian civilizations ([Morris, 2010](#); [Acemoglu and Robinson, 2012](#)). Explaining why Atlantic-facing rather than other Eurasian states began the colonization of the Americas and Oceania is beyond the scope of our paper. However, we do show that the relative lateness of European colonial acquisitions in North Africa, the Middle East and Asia is consistent with the role of relative technological and organizational leads in explaining colonization's timing. That is, Western Europeans tended to colonize earlier the non-Eurasian areas with substantially lower levels of technology, state experience, and duration of reliance on agriculture, and most of their colonization of regions in or near non-European Old World core civilizations occurred only after the technological gap between Western Europe, on the one hand, and North Africa and Asia, on the other, had grown much larger, partly through colonial acquisition and intra-European competition. The importance of Europe's growing technological lead for explaining later European conquests within Eurasia fits a more general analytical rubric connecting colonization with technological and organizational advantages. That rubric adds, to Diamond's focus on

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